

Readings: James 3:13-4:1 and Mk. 9:30-37

Is there anybody among those present who as a child was evacuated during the Battle of Arnhem? Don't be afraid to raise your hand – I will not ask you to come up here and tell your story. Whether they are here this evening or not, we know that they still exist: in Oosterbeek or elsewhere. Children that had to leave everything behind, often after spending a few days of absolute terror in a cellar. Children that had to walk for days on end, together with their families, depending on the hospitality of total strangers, of people they knew vaguely or relatives. Children that were welcomed – or not.

We can find their collected stories on the website of Museum Hartenstein. Heartbreaking stories, although some of them also warm your heart: large families finding shelter in the house of total strangers. Aid workers who do their utmost to help in difficult circumstances and with limited resources. Happy memories of the months spent on a farm, or of extra tutoring received in the host family.

But there are other stories too, and it is one of those that I want to share with you now. I don't particularly like to do this, but I will do it anyway.

In 1944 Christina van Benthem was a 12 year old girl. Her story goes as follows: We were given an address on Harderwijkweg. Those people were so religious, it made you feel sick. My brother and I had to sort the apples in the attic, but we weren't allowed to eat any of them. My mother asked if she could have the soapy water after they had done the laundry, but they refused.

This farmer was a smith as well and we slept in his shop, behind the shop window where everybody could see us, and it was freezing cold. We couldn't stay there, so off we went. I will never ever forget it, here we are walking on a country road, it started to snow. My mother was so desperate, she wanted to take the baby out of his pram and throw him away, 'I can't cope anymore, I can't', and the baby cried and cried. When we passed a farm my father asked permission to change the baby's nappy in the barn. 'No.'

This child has experienced rejection and cold-heartedness, and after all those years she is still bitter and full of resentment. It is a confronting story, especially for us, here in church. 'Those people were so religious, it made you feel sick.' That is like a punch in the stomach. Those people apparently were regular churchgoers, and probably read the Bible every day. What went wrong? How was it possible? I'm sure this farmer and his wife were not what we call 'bad people'. They were only human, just like we are. People who suffered in their own way because of the war. Suddenly they had to put up a family of 5, including a sick baby. What about food? Where should they sleep? How do we find enough bedlinen? It is impossible! And so they took their helplessness and frustration out on their guests. It is so understandable. But as a consequence there is this person who, seventy years later, speaks harsh words about their religion.

It is an unsettling and upsetting story. It certainly unsettles and upsets me. What would I have done? Can I know for certain that I would have done the right thing? Being a Christian and being a good person obviously aren't one and the same thing. Being a Christian is no guarantee that on critical moments I will make the right choice. Especially not under extreme circumstances, like a war situation. Psychology has taught us much about the mechanisms that are activated in such times. Ancient instincts, survival techniques that can kill any acquired decency. If our lives are at stake, the layer of civilization can turn out to be very thin indeed.

We have just read a passage from the letter of St. James. On the saints' calendar we find this apostle under different names, one of them being 'St. James the Righteous'. Reading his letter we do understand why. He strongly emphasizes the duty to live a righteous life, in which faith speaks through action.

'But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.'

'So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.' Something that is dead will decay, spreading a foul smell. It fills us with disgust and horror. Isn't it precisely this disgust that we hear in the story with which we began? It made Christina van Benthem feel sick.

Faith has to live. It has to breathe. It has to set our hands and feet in motion. It has to be flesh and blood. That is why James provides us with a lot of practical examples: caring for widows and orphans; not making distinctions between rich and poor people, but treating everybody with the same respect; providing clothing and food to the poor. And let's not forget his almost literally fiery lecture about the use of our tongue. And in the passage we have just read he speaks about envy and selfish ambition, that create havoc in our dealings with each other.

None of these examples is set in a war situation. They are taken from everyday life, the life of normal people like you and me. James also is addressing normal *believers* like you and me. Apparently we desperately need this practical teaching. We have to become aware of what I would like to call 'the small evils'. Knowing St. James he would not approve of this expression, but it is my way to distinguish it from the 'great evils' of which the newspapers inform us: war, human trafficking, organized crime, destruction of natural resources on a big scale. We do not encounter those evils on a daily basis – thank God. But St. James draws our attention to the things that we so easily overlook, downplaying or extenuating them. Gossip, avarice, envy, manipulation, looking the other way when somebody needs you – it is all so human. It often goes unnoticed, even to ourselves. The consequences are not always visible or they don't seem too bad. It may even seem a streetwise course of action. But St. James makes it very clear: that sort of behaviour is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. Tough talk.

Let us not fool ourselves. Real goodness doesn't come to us out of the blue. Even in small things the urge to save our lives may be too strong to resist. It is not sufficient to know 'how to behave properly'.

That's why the words of St. James here are so important. He points out to us the wisdom of God that comes from above. The wisdom that is given to us when we ask for it, as he says elsewhere in his letter. That is the task he provides us with for every day: in your daily life, ask for the wisdom of God that is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. Feed on it, delve into it, put it into practice. Conquer the small and mean evils in your life by deliberately choosing to do good. And be assured that resisting the small evils requires much courage. Anybody who has ever tried to silence a gossiping bunch of people can tell you that. Those who teach themselves this attitude may hope that in days of greater evil they will know what to do and will receive courage to do it.

If God's wisdom has taken up residence in our hearts, then we have received Christ himself. St. Paul calls him 'the wisdom of God'. If He fills us, our goodness will be more than a thin layer of gilding that will yield to any pressure. Because it will be his goodness. A heartwarming, living, loving goodness. We do not follow a set of moral teachings, but a living Person. Somebody who invites us, and wants to be invited by us.

If we follow him and love him, our hearts will open towards all other human beings. In them we will see our Beloved, who is knocking on our doors. And who would not open the door to their Beloved? This way we can work for peace. This way we can learn to live as a people of peace. This way we can create a safe environment for our children. An environment in which we also can welcome those of others. And then we will discover, to our amazement and joy, that Christ himself has come to live among us.